

BORDER BITES

“Digesting the world’s borders

...One bite at a time”



The northernmost external border of the Schengen zone in continental Europe lies above the 69th parallel north, running between Norway and Russia. Despite its remoteness, the hostile climatic conditions and sparse population density, until recently this borderland was seen as an example of improved relations between West and East. Such a reputation greatly relied on the Barents Euro-Arctic region – an institutional framework that came into being in 1993 to replace Cold War confrontation with collaboration. Years of coordinated joint activities among the northern parts of Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden resulted in numerous social networks, simplified border-crossing rules for Barents’ residents and, as some argue, the creation of a distinct Barents identity “concentrated in the triangle Kirkenes–Murmansk–Rovaniemi”¹.

Since *perestroika* and the opening of the formerly closed border, contacts between border municipalities - Pechenga Rayon (Murmansk Oblast, Russia) and Sør-Varanger commune (Finnmark fylke, Norway) - have been intense and diverse. Although local cross-border interactions have never

City twinning on the Russian-Norwegian border: from neighbours to twin cities and back

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been the focus for Barents’ cooperation, on several occasions border municipalities have played the role of trailblazers in exercising transfrontier lifestyle and cross-border cooperation (hereinafter CBC). In this piece I trace the dynamics of a recent border-blurring experiment that was initiated and agreed upon nationally and implemented locally – the launch of the twin city relationship. To provide a more grounded analysis, I use both secondary sources as well as empirical data (interviews and a survey) collected in the Russian-Norwegian borderland in 2013-2016.

As the concept of twin cities still causes more controversy than agreement in academic debates, let me clarify that in this piece twin city is understood as a rather demanding type of intercity relationship which implies coordinated strategies and action plans towards building joint future, combined with grassroots networking and mutual empathy of residents. Typically, in the context of international twin cities, the settlements involved in

¹ Heikkilä, M. (2014) “Editorial: Testing the Barents identity” *Barents Studies* Supplementary Issue. [Online] Available from: https://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/59414/barents_pop_3_Testing-the-barents-identity_screen.pdf?sequence=2 [Accessed: 20th March 2017] .

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twinning are cities adjacent to the border and to each other. In contrast to twin cities, neighbouring cities do not have strict limitations in terms of their geographical proximity and eagerness to work together towards a joint future. Keeping these definitions in mind, let me proceed with the case analysis.

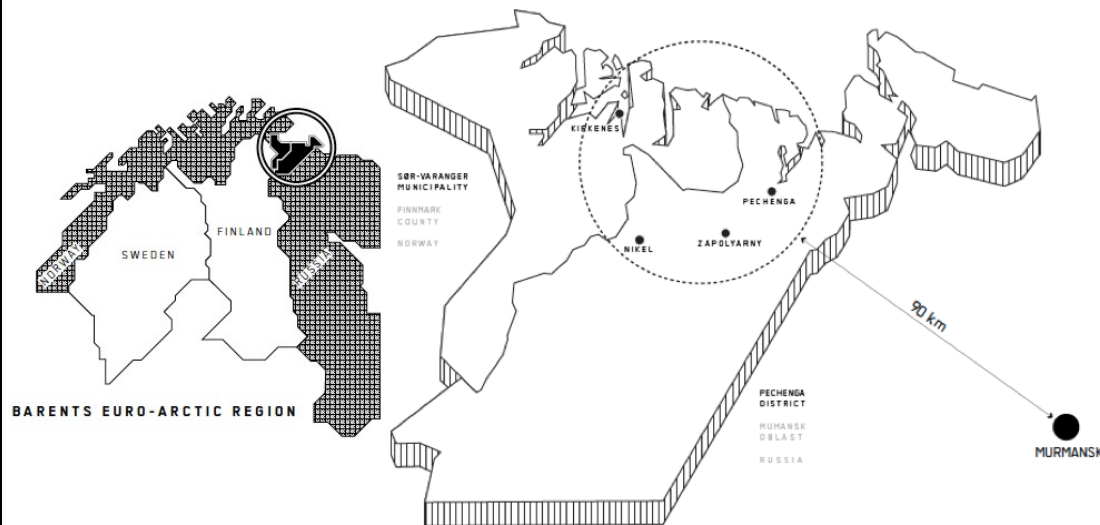


Figure 1: Map of the Barents region and border municipalities on the Russian-Norwegian border. Image by Øystein Rø, Transborder studio

Nikel and Kirkenes: establishing a tradition of cross-border dialogue

Today, the administrative centers of the border municipalities of Nikel and Kirkenes, small Arctic towns 57 km apart from each other, have coexisted for about eight decades (for population details see the Table below). Their period as neighbours includes a number of shared experiences, such as early mining specialization, transformation into strategic outposts and battlefields during the Second World War, and liberation within the same military operation by the Red Army. After liberation, these border settlements faced off along one of the most isolated Soviet frontiers – the only one that separated the Soviet Union from a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As interviews show, at that time residents of both towns felt as if they were living at the edge of the world.

Country, total	Russia	146,674,541	Norway	5,258,317
Border region	Murmansk Oblast	756,897	Finnmark fylke	75,758
Regional capital	Murmansk	299,834	Vadsø	5,107
Border municipality	Pechenga Rayon	37,181	Sør-Varanger	10,199
Municipal center	Nikel	11,600	Kirkenes	3,564
Other towns in the border municipality	Zapolyarny	15,202	Bjørnevatn	2,528
	Pechenga	2,936	Hesseng	1,780

Table 1: Population statistics for the Russian-Norwegian cross-border region (by January 2017, based on Russia's Federal State Statistics Service and Statistics Norway)

Although such a historical background suggests that before the 1990s the border was a sealed barrier, according to survey results, one third of informants see the contemporary intermunicipal cooperation as a continuation of Soviet-Norwegian dialogue. Construction of the Boris Gleb hydro-

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power plant on the Pasvik river by Norwegian specialists in 1960-1964 was the main interstate collaboration project during the Cold War period. The state border runs through the middle of that river and hence down the centre of the Boris Gleb dam. Not long after the dam was built, in 1973 the border municipalities signed their first cooperation agreement. Since then communication between Pechenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger commune has taken on various forms – from delegation exchanges in the 1980s, humanitarian aid flowing from Norway to Russia, particularly to these neighbouring region in early 1990s (after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequent worsening of the economic situation on the Russian side), to joint project work from 2000s onwards.

Cooperative ties among border municipalities were popping up in all spheres of life – from arts to health care. I'll provide a few examples that proved active and durable, and have become flagships of Russian-Norwegian local collaboration. One of the pioneers of cooperation were municipal libraries, whose representatives first met back in 1983. Their unquenchable enthusiasm helped to put their dialogue on a regular footing and to maintain it without external funding or involvement from national, regional or local authorities. Border libraries proved to be highly experimental and tried out joint seminars for experience transfer, temporary exchanges of books, employees, whole exhibitions and other material, as well as ideas and best practices.



Figure 2: Kirkenes central square is dominated with the Sør-Varanger library, the frontrunner of local cross-border cooperation since 1983. All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

The sphere of pre-school education presents another example of long standing CBC. Ties between kindergartens evolved from direct contacts in the 1990s to coordinated partnerships supervised by the two city halls. Seeking to share the experience of cross-cultural exchange with the whole borderland community, from early 2000s kindergartens started arranging an annual joint exhibition of children's drawings called "Russia and Norway through children's eyes". After being displayed in Kirkenes in the Borderland Museum for half a year, the exhibition is relocated to Nikel.

The other borderland 'brand' is an international twelve-kilometer long skiing-track called 'The Ski of Friendship' that takes place annually at the tri-border point where Norway, Finland and Russia meet. Coined by the General Consul of Russia in Kirkenes, the idea for such a competition received governmental support from all countries involved and has been attracting hundreds of participants annually since 1994. Looking just at these three examples, one may conclude that two municipalities developed various connections long before the twin city initiative arrived to the Russian-Norwegian borderland.

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Figure 3: An identical copy of the tri-border point where Russia, Norway and Finland meet was erected in front of the municipal administration in Nickel in 2015.

Twin city between Nickel and Kirkenes - a temporary project?

The idea of twin city ties between Nickel and Kirkenes was formulated in an instruction letter sent from the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs to the mayor of Sør-Varanger. In 2008, as soon as the initiative received that support among municipal and national authorities on both sides of the border, the Pechenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger communes declared the start of collaboration in a twin city project. Within the first five years of interaction under the twin city project umbrella, rhetoric about twinning was widely present on both sides of the border. The two municipalities tried fostering their ties by re-engineering existing cooperative ventures and by incorporating actors that hadn't yet taken part in transfrontier activities. Ties were intensified through the launch of working groups to coordinate cooperation in particular fields, and through so-called 'mobile seminars' - seminars 'on wheels' that took place on both sides of the border, with participants moving from one city to the other (and crossing the border) together, and brainstorming on their way. Several organizations, such as register offices, museums and voluntary associations, met their counterparts from the other side of the border for the first time through these initiatives.

At that time, there were a number of events sporting the 'twin city' label. Some scholars have assumed that the use of this prefix for any type of cooperation between Nickel and Kirkenes was evidence of the intention of the two municipalities to apply for European funding², as similar local integration projects have been quite successful in acquiring EU funds. However, such expectations have not been borne out (yet).

The understanding of the twin city initiative as being "just a temporary project" only crystalized after 2013. In interviews, both sides emphasized

² Figenschou, A. (2011). The Twin Cities of Petchenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger Municipality. Master Thesis. The Faculty of Humanities. University of Oslo.

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that intermunicipal cooperation was initiated much earlier than the twinning project, and that its scope today is more extensive. One Norwegian informant explained to me that “twin-towns” are in fact “more important on the global scale than for the local community”. Another criticism of twin city talks on the Russian-Norwegian borderland is to point to the “artificial” emergence of twin-cities, that they were imposed by national governments, not initiated by residents themselves.

According to interviews, by 2014 local politicians and city hall employees of both border municipalities appreciated the publicity that Russian-Norwegian CBC at the local level received thanks to the twin city agreement, but complained that the practical effects of it have been slim. One of the reasons why the agreement has had such a modest effect is that it did not include any extra funding for cooperation. Actually, funding for cooperation has been reduced since the agreement was signed. For instance, Sør-Varanger commune used to employ an international advisor in charge of CBC issues. Although the international advisor position has been restored in Sør-Varanger municipality, it was abolished for several months when the municipality faced financial difficulties in 2013 and had to cut its budget drastically. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway was asked to provide a financial coverage for the position but refused to do so.

Besides lacking the funds to develop twin city cooperation, the priorities of Pechenga Rayon and Sør-Varanger communes have altered with changes in their mayors. This is evident if one studies the action plans signed by Nikel and Kirkenes. The intermunicipal action plan for 2011-2012 is full of optimism and is written in the true twin city spirit, pointing at common interests in developing a cross-border labour market, joint programs of vocational training for municipal servants, better Internet coverage of events on the other side of the border, the necessity of launching permanent public transportation between the two municipal centers, and setting up a Consular day in Nikel so Russian borderlanders could apply for their visas without taking a day off work in order to undertake the four-hour drive to the Norwegian Consulate General in Murmansk. The next action plan, for 2014-2015, refers to twinning in its preamble, and even contains



Figure 4: Despite the small size of Kirkenes (it's population in 2014 was about 3,500 inhabitants), this city was chosen to accommodate the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Norway.

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a paragraph dedicated to twin city cooperation, but is less ambitious and more practical. Many of previously announced ambitions that hadn't been fulfilled were omitted. On the other hand, the idea of applying for City Twins Association membership was mentioned as one of the primary goals. Thus, the second action plan still has its focus on the twin city format. By contrast, the third action plan, for 2016-2019, lacks any mention of twin cities. Although its text is more coherent and better structured, its content is focused on functional cooperation and does not contain any reference to joint ambitions or a more integrated future. It could be described as the most balanced and neutral document out of the three discussed. The third action plan lists several initiatives that border municipalities should aim to instigate, namely, projects on social adaptation for people with disabilities, work with foster families, energy efficiency and waste management. Instead of city halls coordinating CBC, this action plan suggests increasing direct contact among CBC actors (e.g. associations of businessmen and heads of educational organizations). All in all, although the city halls of the border municipalities have continued working closely with each other, the term twin city is almost excluded from the daily routine of the Russian-Norwegian borderland, as this third action plan shows.

The other recent feature of the borderland is the expanding network of Kirkenes' partner cities. The city mobilized its sister city relationship with Severomorsk and signed a new sister city agreement with Murmansk (which is over 25 times more populous and substantially more resource-rich than Nikel). A recent interview with a Sør-Varanger municipal servant implies that, in terms of neighbourhood, the scope of communication desired by Sør-Varanger has changed from bilateral cooperation with Pechenga Rayon to trilateral cooperation that includes the Finns. As a consequence of this fragmentation of external ties, Pechenga Rayon is not seen as the primary partner of Sør-Varanger anymore.

“Visa-freedom” and grassroots bonding

A lion's share of interviewees named the establishment of a 30-km visa-free zone as the most notable achievement of cooperation (and twinning) between Nikel and Kirkenes. Although the connection between the visa-free program and twinning is not straightforward, there is no doubt they have greatly influenced one another. The principle of establishing visa-free local border traffic at the Russian-Norwegian borderland was achieved and fixed in a bilateral intergovernmental agreement in 2010. Since May 2012, when the agreement came into force, people who reside in border municipalities within a (slightly extended) 30 km zone (for three years and more) became eligible for a special border pass that allows them to cross the bor-



Figure 5: A Nikel-based stationery shop with opening hours given in Norwegian - an example of Pechenga Rayon entrepreneurs trying to create language friendly environment for Norwegian clients.

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der without visas and stay within the 30 km zone for up to 15 days. At that time, it wasn't uncommon to see this zone as a testing ground for expanding a visa-free program to the whole cross-border region, including Murmansk Oblast and Finnmark Fylke or even all of Northern Norway.

Due to the availability of the so-called Pomor-visas, introduced by Norway in 2009, allowing Russian citizens living in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk Oblasts to get multiple entry Schengen visa to Norway without holding prior invitations, the interest in local border traffic permits on the Russian side has been modest. So far only 3.250 Russians, or 8.7% of Pechenga Rayon residents, have obtained the border certificate. However, the local border traffic permit has been extremely popular with Norwegian borderlanders: by early 2017 more than 6.300 Norwegians, or over 60% of Sør-Varanger residents, had obtained it³.



Figure 6: The only border-crossing point on the Russian-Norwegian border is located in Borisoglebsk-Storskog. The peak in border crossings occurred in 2013, when over 320,000 people crossed. Recently, crossing has itself become more time-consuming.

As a Norwegian interviewee stated, the local border traffic permit opened the door for crossing the border to a completely new group of border-crossers on the Norwegian side. Sør-Varanger residents started including the Russian border municipality within their space of daily life – filling or fixing their cars, visiting a hairdresser or a dentist, purchasing building materials, doing the groceries – and for leisure activities such as going out to a sushi bar or relaxing in a spa. It is fair to say that before local border traffic was introduced, Norwegians had no incentive to stop in Nikel or in Pechenga Rayon. Interviews with Sør-Varanger residents collected at the beginning of 2013 provide evidence for this: the majority of informants described their experience of being to Russia in relation to Murmansk, although the only road to Murmansk ran next to the town of Nikel.

The other change that has altered patterns of interactions among borderlanders is the reconstruction of the road from the border-crossing point to

³ Staalesen, A. "Visa-free regime will strengthen special relationship with Russia, North Norwegian leaders say" *The Independent Barents Observer* May 25, 2017. Available from: <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/borders/2017/05/visa-free-regime-will-strengthen-special-relationship-russia-north-norwegian-leaders> [Accessed: 3rd August 2017]

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Figure 7: The newly decorated Palace of Culture called "Sunrise" in Nikel.

Murmansk. Since the new sections of the road were opened in 2013-14, E105, the only highway that connects Norway and Murmansk, now goes through Zapolyarny and avoids Nikel. Now visiting Nikel implies an extra 20-minute drive, meaning that it is bypassed by the majority of

cross-border tourists. As the administrative center of Pechenga Rayon, Nikel hosts a number of CBC events and still is visited by some Norwegian borderlanders. However, according to interviews in 2016, trips to Zapolyarny are more frequent than to Nikel. It is worth saying that Zapolyarny has always had a better reputation than Nikel thanks to larger variety of services and a neat city center with no industrial pipes on the horizon (as mining activities and the smelter are located further away from the city). This reputation has been strengthened since changes in the local border traffic have been implemented. Nowadays, when discussing plans for cross-border shopping in Zapolyarny on the web, Norwegians often refer to it by the nickname "Zappo". Thus, with the increase in local border traffic Zapolyarny has become more central in catering to Norwegian borderlanders and hence to some extent has diluted the twin city relationship between Nikel and Kirkenes.

A Globalized Arctic and re-bordering in the High North

Recent geopolitical conditions have not been particularly favourable to twinning either. Since the Ukrainian crisis broke out, relations between Russia and the West have been rather tense. Rounds of sanctions and counter-sanctions, as well as the freezing of several cooperation projects, have done substantial harm in terms of economics and mutual trust to both sides. The Barents region have witnessed these same dynamics. Combined with the deep downturn in the oil industry and Russia's currency devaluation, these events have led to a decline in purchasing power on the Russian side and consequently to profound fluctuations in cross-border flows. The border-crossing traffic on the Russian-Norwegian border was down 23% in 2015 (compared to the level of 2014) and down 3% in 2016 (compared to 2015).

Besides, as an increasingly globalized space, the European Arctic (namely Russia's borders with Norway and Finland) turned into a temporary transit passage for Middle Eastern refugees and migrants seeking sanctuary in the European Economic Area. Over 5,500 migrants and refugees entered Norway from Russia via the remote Arctic border-crossing point in 2015. This flow emerged unexpectedly and was a challenge for both sides of the border. While this transit migrant route in the High North was labelled as part of a hybrid war (many were suspicious of Russia initiating the flow to destabilize its neighbours), locally it brought both border municipalities to the edge of a humanitarian crisis and raised serious security concerns

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among borderlanders on the Russian side. Suspicions regarding Russia's role in this Arctic route appear to have been dashed by two researchers from Norway's Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Arild Moe and Lars Rowe, who concluded that "Russian practices were not altered in any significant way in 2015", and that the Norwegian side had an "incorrect impression of the Russian border regime being more restrictive than it really was"⁴.

Today, anti-migrant sentiment and a fear of illegal border crossing in the High North has materialized as a 200-meter-long and 3.5-meter-high steel fence built along the Russian-Norwegian border. The decision to construct it came from Oslo in 2016, and provoked a strong negative reaction in the borderland. While some Norwegian politicians interpret this re-bordering as "an ugly albeit very symbolic action against Moscow" that has "a Cold War aftertaste"⁵, my Norwegian informants noted that the construction of the fence testifies to deep lack of understanding between the North and South of Norway. Although walling of borders has never been efficient, this fence on the Russian-Norwegian border is seen as a particular nonsense. Both Russian and Norwegian interviewees make fun of it, as the fence co-



Figure 8: A Syrian refugee on a bicycle preparing to cross the border to Norway. Photo by Tarjei Abelsen (NRK).



Figure 9: The Norwegian-Russian border, seen from Skafferhullet, Norway, with a Norwegian fence. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

⁴ Moe, A., and Rowe, L. "Asylstrømmen fra Russland til Norge i 2015: Bevisst russisk politikk?" *Nordisk Østforum*, 30, pp. 80–97. [Online] Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17585/nof.v30.432>. [Accessed: 20th March 2017]

⁵ "Norway's Fence Along Russian Border an 'Ugly', 'Symbolic' Move 'Against Moscow'" *Sputnik International* September 13, 2016. [Online] Available from: <https://sptnknw.ws/chAA> [Accessed: 16th August 2017]

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vers a small fraction of the 196-kilometer border and looks less impressive than fences that are “put up around the garden or on the cemetery”. Interestingly enough, in 2017 Norway invested in building a new bridge on the road going to the border-crossing point⁶.

As fencing and bridging along the Russian-Norwegian border have been taking place sequentially, the twinning project may regain its priority status as well. At the same time, the scale of geopolitical and geo-economical turbulence suggests that this might take a while to materialize. Although administrative support (particularly on the Norwegian side) for the twin city project has decreased, these border municipalities still enjoy considerable informal people-to-people cooperation. The increased intensity of local cross-border flows and their redirection to Zapolyarny, due to infrastructural changes, are significant new features of the Russian-Norwegian borderland, ones which twinning will have to respond to in the future.



Figure 10: Border tourism is exercised quite intensively on the Norwegian side of the border. One of possible tours brings travelers (by boat) right up to the Russian-Norwegian border, where you can see the border but not allowed to cross it.

⁶ Nilsen, T. “Norway builds new bridge to Russia” *The Independent Barents Observer* May 17, 2017. [Online] Available from: <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/borders/2017/05/norway-builds-new-bridge-russia> [Accessed: 18th June 2017]